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The Transatlantic Athletic Trainer: Manchester's James Robinson and the American Coaching System

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Coaching and training practices during the nineteenth century were a feature of many professional sports, relying heavily on the influence of ex-professional athlete-cum-trainers to devise successful programmes and regimes to aid competition, with their methods being shared amongst their communities of practice. Within athletics, or more notably its professional predecessor, pedestrianism, the role of the trainer was highly regarded and Britain became a hub for professional competitions. However, by the 1860s, the sport was in decline and the emerging amateur athletic organisations marginalised practices and individuals associated with pedestrianism, discrediting the previously valued skills of the trainer from their club constitutions. Owing to the perceived transferrable nature of athletic training, some professionals obtained employment in working-class activities, such as soccer, whilst others migrated to foreign climes where coaching was viewed more pragmatically. Many made the transatlantic journey to America where private organisations, athletic clubs and college teams secured the services of successful British trainers who subsequently became responsible for the conditioning and wellbeing of a diverse range of athletic performers. This paper presents the biography of one of these individuals, James Robinson, who successfully made the transition from British pedestrianism to the American college system, providing insight into the changing nature of transatlantic coaching attitudes during the long Victorian period.

British Attitudes and Pedestrianism: Professionalism vs. Amateurism

Before the formation of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in the latter stages of the nineteenth-century, pedestrianism, the professional version of athletics, was one of Britain's favourite pastimes. Running grounds were constructed to host premier athletic competitions, and crowds from across the United Kingdom would engage with these activities. However, despite its popularity with the working classes, the educated classes became increasingly critical of these "low" entertainments, partly because pedestrian matches were often accompanied by crowd disorders, gambling and drinking. Legislation focused on purifying pedestrianism by reforming the sport to reflect the principles of amateurism, and separate organisations were formed in which to direct and control athletic activity.

According to Shearman, 'the athletic movement...like other movements and fashions, good or bad, spread downwards, to the masses', and geographically spread upwards throughout England and Scotland more rapidly during the 1870s and 1880s.¹ The London clubs were concerned about the Northern organisations and their perceived challenge to the London-centric activities and, in a bid to demonstrate control, continued to redefine and enforce rules to maintain exclusivity and class distinctions within the athletic environment.² Essentially, the Northern athlete was a different breed to that promoted in the South, and the clubs and other organisational structures were developed in such a manner as to only reinforce this difference.

Even with the amateur restrictions, the profitability of athletics meant that many clubs, venues and individuals were benefitting from the gate receipts or additional side betting that was still present in these competitions, with early amateur contests taking on many of the characteristics of professional events.³ Amateurs 'transgressed the laws' of these associations but did not face the same punishments as professionals due to their social and economic background being "right" for the sport,⁴ with tension rising between the amateur middle-class university men, and professional pub-owning entrepreneurial classes. It was the working-class men, mostly in the northern regions, who required financial support to engage in competitive sport, and they had to make the careful decision to continue to compete within the amateur regulations or to diverge into professional activities where limited sporting careers could be established. When association football started to develop a clientele at the end of the nineteenth century, competitors were able to transfer their trade, with many ex-

¹ Shearman, *Athletics and Football*, 226-227.

² Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885* (London: Redwood Burn, 1978), 131-132, 135; Peter Mewett, 'Discourses of Deception: Cheating in Professional Running', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (2002): 294.

³ *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, June 2, 1850, 7.

⁴ James I. Lupton and James M.K. Lupton, *The Pedestrian's Record: to which is Added a Description of the External Human Form Illustrated with Anatomical Plates* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1890), 11; Neil Wigglesworth, *The Evolution of English Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 95.

professional pedestrian athletes becoming successful football trainers due to the perceived transferable nature of athletic training practices. For example, Fred Bacon, who after a very successful running career, being the world record holder for the amateur mile in 1895, became a professional trainer at Powderhall, Edinburgh. He then turned to football, taking on the role of trainer to Manchester United and led them to the FA Cup win in 1909 and division one title in 1910. Others moved abroad, with North America being a popular destination due to the college and athletic club system valuing expertise. This paper will examine aspects the life course of one of such individual, James Robinson, who successfully made the transition from amateur athlete to professional trainer during this period of athletic tension, considering several 'snap-shot moments' which highlight important aspects of Robinson's narrative and, in particular, considers the pressures experienced, and measures required, in order to establish a career in sport, providing examination of how these practices varied across different Western cultures where amateur and professional sport were perceived differently.

Robinson Biography

James Robinson was born in 1847 in Failsworth, Manchester, at the epicentre of Manchester's professional pedestrian scene along the Oldham Road, Newton Heath. His surroundings provided exposure to major pedestrian competitions that were highly patronised throughout the 1860s at both the Royal Oak and Copenhagen Running Grounds, as well as amateur athletic contents that were still under the control of these public house running enclosures. Whilst the sporting landscape of Manchester was transforming with the growth and formation of dedicated athletic and cycling venues, such as Belle Vue (1887), Fallowfield (1892) and White City (1907),⁵ this did not prevent clubs from forming around public houses and professional arenas, with many of the city's athletic clubs established and maintained by the working-class clientele associated with professional pedestrian hubs. Unsurprisingly, Robinson competed in local amateur competitions for Failsworth, Mottram, Stalybridge and Manchester Athletic Clubs, specialising in the one- and two- mile walking events that were endorsed by local sporting promoters and organised clubs. Robinson's sporting record indicated that he was one of the top walkers within England, and his success in the major sporting competitions only reinforced his position, however his Northern routes played a role in his non-selection for many AAA official meetings. Considering his champion status, from 1874, there are no further records of

⁵ Russell, 'Sporting Manchester, from c1800 to the Present': 5.

Robinson's competitive career, but his involvement in sport was continuing to develop through other avenues instead.

His "veterinary accreditation" enabled his appointment as a trainer at the renowned Saratoga Stables in New York from 1876, where he was responsible for the health of the racehorses, as well as the breeding of cattle and show and race dogs at the Saratoga Kennels. Some suggestions could be made here regarding Robinson's background as both a butcher and athlete, which may have provided the opportune education to pursue a career in animal care.⁶

Whilst employed at the Saratoga Stables, Robinson was appointed trainer to the long-distance athletes at the Harlem Athletic Club.⁷ In October 1879, once the Saratoga Springs racing calendar had been fulfilled, Robinson became manager at the Park Garden pedestrian arena, Boston, where he had re-developed the arena to incorporate an athletic and cycling track to the highest specification. By utilising his knowledge of the pedestrian systems employed by many of the Manchester sporting entrepreneurs, competitions mirrored the professional activities that had previously been popular, and lucrative, in Britain. Nonetheless, whilst the sporting landscape of Britain was emulated across the Atlantic, the ethos was very different.⁸ Whereas Britain had always been a society based around class and status, America did not regard these social divisions in the same way, and, therefore, sport reflected their own values. The American attitude towards sport reflected its democratic and meritocratic society, and those who were engaged in sport were able to condition themselves and compete to the best of their ability.⁹ Essentially, America had a different interpretation to Britain on what constituted the amateur status and they shaped athletics to reflect their business-like, professional and pragmatic 'Yankee values', which became the accepted ideals and took precedence over British influences.¹⁰

The appointment of a professional trainer was an 'in vogue' practice in many American colleges and universities, with college trainers, professional athletes and trainers of various professional sports teams regularly employed in this position within these athletic clubs.¹¹ The opportunity for a career in

⁶ With general knowledge about the anatomy of the different animals acquired through his trade, an understanding of the principles of good animal health and care learnt through his connections to local farmers and breeders, and the principles of human health also applicable through his athletic schooling.

⁷ *New York Times*, April 28, 1876, 10.

⁸ John R. Betts, *America's Sporting Heritage: 1850-1950* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1974), 19-20.

⁹ Richard Wettan and Joe Willis, 'Social Stratification in the New York Athletic Club: a Preliminary Analysis of the Impact of the Club on Amateur Sport in Late Nineteenth Century America', *Sport History Review* 7, no. 1 (1976): 41-42.

¹⁰ Roberta J. Park, 'Sport, Gender and Society in a Transatlantic Victorian Perspective', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 2, no. 1 (1985): 12; Dave Day, 'America's "Mysterious Training Tables": British Reaction and Amateur Hypocrisy', *Sport in History* 34, no. 1 (2014): 91.

¹¹ Roberta J. Park, 'Athletes and their Training in Britain and America, 1800-1914', in *Sport and Exercise Science: Essays in the History of Sports Medicine*, eds. Jack W. Berryman and Roberta J. Park (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 83.

sport was much more obvious abroad and the English trainer was especially welcomed, with their skills in conditioning athletes, developed through their association with the professional sporting practices in Britain, being valued, and their impact on the American sporting environment was apparent from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Robinson's success through his many athletic endeavours contributed to his appointment at Harvard University in 1881, where he was responsible for the training of the track team, being congratulated for his 'careful and faithful work' in preparing the athletes at the college.¹²

However, Harvard had always taken a strong stance on the position of athletic sport in the education system, looking to the Oxbridge universities in England as their guide and adopting their amateur attitude. In 1873, the Harvard president was concerned that sport was becoming too commercialised; the 'evils' of sport, payments, training and the winning at all costs mentality, had penetrated college sport, encouraging students to treat it as a full-time occupation rather than an 'incidental pleasure of their college life'.¹³ In 1882, a committee on the 'regulation of athletic sports' was formed, which, following the amateur ethos, enforced rules that prohibited competition with/against professionals.¹⁴ The strict regulations meant that anyone who was deemed professional by the committee was to have their employment terminated, including William Bancroft, the highly successful rowing coach, Robinson, as athletic trainer, and the baseball professionals.¹⁵ The faculty favoured the British system of athletics and encouraged other American colleges to follow suit. Generally, many of the college athletic committees had taken a laissez-faire approach to the student-controlled sports, and, as these sports had gained considerable interest and were widely reported in the press, these performances became a measure of both athletic and academic success, and the committees wanted to provide the

¹² *Harvard Crimson*, June 3, 1881.

¹³ D. A. Sargent, 'History of the Administration of Inter-Collegiate Athletics in the United States', *American Physical Education Review* 15 (1910): 252.

¹⁴ *Ibid*: 253.

¹⁵ *Harvard Crimson*, November 27, 1883.

This view of the faculty's control over student activities upset many of the Harvard undergraduates and the cancellation of all intercollegiate football games in 1882, specifically the Yale-Harvard Thanksgiving match, deemed unsporting and ungentlemanly by the athletic committee, further fuelled press commentary on the future direction for university sports.¹⁵ Harvard's previous domination in athletic sports was faltering and their closest rivals, Yale and Princeton, were capitalising on their decline. As the university started preparations for the expulsion of football at the college, the students and alumni challenged the faculty and, in 1886, it was agreed that a change in the composition of the committee was necessary to reflect the interest of both students and faculty alike, with the appointment of two students and one alumni member.¹⁵ The power struggle between Harvard and other athletic institutions was not over and Harvard sought to encourage the use of their system in all colleges. When the formation of a NGB for college sport, whose purpose was to eradicate professionalism from within the athletic ranks, was proposed by Harvard in 1883, Yale declined to accept and only a few 'lesser' colleges agreed to a meeting. In February 1883, the student-controlled Intercollegiate Amateur Athletic Association of America met with members of the different college committees where they opposed the faculty procedures, and, without centralised ruling or agreement, the colleges went back to their own individual regulations and organisation. This system remained in place until 1905 when the National Collegiate Athletic Association eventually governed university sport within America.¹⁵

best possible opportunities to exhibit their sporting dominance.¹⁶ Eventually, Harvard realised that they could not uphold all of the principles of amateurism, stating that the traditions of many American sports had yet to be created, unlike the deep-rooted ideology present in British activities, and a more relaxed approach to monitoring these activities was accepted.¹⁷

Robinson relocated to Princeton, New Jersey, in May 1883 where, after training men for the inter-collegiate games, he was appointed to condition the football team and review other college sports.¹⁸ Robinson, as part of his trainer role, ensured that the 'Varsity Grounds' were up to specification and assisted in the officiating of the sporting events.¹⁹ Intramural competitions and benefits were a valued part of the sporting calendar, with Robinson offering training to any man who wished to receive it in the hope of teaching 'sportsmanship, fair play, self-reliance, and respect...through practice to develop a fondness for a sport', a reproduction of British amateur ideals.²⁰ In October 1885, Robinson was paid a salary of \$750, split between the Princeton undergrads and alumni alike, to secure his services, a price fitting of his status.²¹ Traditionally, as all university athletic teams had their own committees and finances, several different trainers would usually have been appointed to attend to each individual club needs. However, Robinson fulfilled this role across a wide range of Princeton's sporting clubs variously between 1883 and 1906, having being appointed due to his expertise, character and positive influence on both the students and athletic department alike. Such positions were not the norm, and Princeton benefitted from Robinsons wide network of sporting connections in order to dominate across the athletic competition calendar.

Robinson Endorsements: Sporting Entrepreneurship

Robinson used his status to promote the track and field season by announcing his athletic entertainments for the Princeton Varsity, offering, 'at his own expense', to lay a track dedicated to exhibitions of running, vaulting and leaping similar to the travelling pedestrian fairs popular in mid-nineteenth-century England.²² Robinson's athletic connections meant the event was filled with

¹⁶ Ronald A. Smith, 'Preludes to the NCAA: Early Failures of Faculty Intercollegiate Athletic Control', in *Sport in America: from Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*, ed. David K. Wiggins (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995), 152.

¹⁷ Francis A. Walker, 'College Athletics', *The Harvard Graduates' Magazine* 2 (1894): 14.

¹⁸ *Harvard Crimson*, October 8, 1883.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, May 10, 1885, 14.

²⁰ Princeton University Archives, AC #109/123/4 – Princeton Athletic Club Announcements; AC #109/ 123/5 – Rules of Selected Intramural Sports; AC #109/123/7 – Baseball, 1871; AC #109/123/11 – Handicap Games, 1878-1899.

²¹ *Sporting Life*, October 28, 1885, 6; *Daily Princetonian*, June 23, 1886, 3; December 17, 1886, 2; *Harvard Crimson*, December 21, 1886.

²² *Daily Princetonian*, February 15, 1886, 2; See Chapter 3 for specific examples.

American and English sporting celebrities, with the exhibition being the most popular spectacle of the athletic calendar.²³ His careful attention in stimulating athletic interest saw more men attend training and there was considerable improvement in their track and field programme.²⁴ The Robinson-endorsed 'medal and cup' for the Princeton Hare and Hounds Club again provided an opportunity to scout further talent.²⁵ Robinson's name was used in a nationwide campaign to endorse Allcock's Porous Plasters,²⁶ and his new column in the *World* provided an additional platform to display his methods and discuss his views on athletics, contributing in his increasing status as a pioneering trainer.²⁷

Regulations to improve the conditions and the safety of sport was one of Robinson's priorities, ensuring the fitness of the team and keeping 'an eye open for any man who is being handled too strenuously'.²⁸ Robinson would closely monitor his athletes, stopping players from training if injuries or tiredness in the legs was observed and, if he saw fit, he would refuse to sign permits for athletes to play on match days so as to avoid unnecessary strain on the body.²⁹ Additionally, in 1888, Robinson, having returned to England to spend the Christmas with his Mancunian family, witnessed the Christmas Eve rugby football match between England and Scotland where he took notes on the style and rules to report to the Intercollegiate Football Association.³⁰ Robinson was quick to present his findings, suggesting that the American game had much to learn from its English counterpart, providing new rules that would avoid the dangers of rib and leg injuries and generally improve the safety of the game.³¹

The role of trainer, where strict engagement was only required for approximately six weeks at a time, was flexible, and this enabled Robinson to pursue these other sporting opportunities in the athletic "off season". He also continued to yield additional employment at the Voorhees family stock farm and stables, and he regularly returned to England where he engaged in the profitable business of cattle and canine shipping, breeding and rearing.³²

²³ *Daily Princetonian*, February 24, 1886, 4; March 1, 1886, 3.

²⁴ *Daily Princetonian*, March 20, 1889, 1; September 30, 1889, 1.

²⁵ *Daily Princetonian*, March 20, 1889, 1; April 24, 1889, 1; October 16, 1889, 1.

²⁶ *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 26, 1886, 4; *Huron Daily Huronite*, December 19, 1890, 4; *Logansport Journal*, July 22, 1893, 3.

²⁷ *Daily Princetonian*, November 3, 1886, 3.

²⁸ Edwards, *Football Days*, 306-308.

²⁹ *New York Times*, October 4, 1901.

³⁰ *Daily Princetonian*, December 7, 1888, 3.

³¹ *Daily Princetonian*, January 7, 1889, 3; *Sporting Life*, January 17, 1889, 8; *Boston Daily Globe*, January 21, 1889, 6.

³² *Harvard Crimson*, October 11, 1882; November 25, 1882; January 23, 1883; *Boston Daily Globe*, January 21, 1883, 8; Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City 1825-1863*, 3.

External organisations sought after Robinson's athletic expertise; the Manhattan Athletic Club, offered him the position of head trainer and director to advise amateur members and oversee the development of the MAC's athletic future at their newly constructed clubhouse in New York City.³³ Offering a salary 'three times as large' as that of Princeton, the job was one he could not refuse, making him, at that point, the highest paid trainer in athletic history.³⁴ His 'systematic' style of training and 'skillful' preparation in conditioning athletes was admired, with Robinson's 'valuable' skills acknowledged by the MAC in their valuation of his services.³⁵ He regularly visited England to scout for new talent and offer them incentives to join the MAC, encouraging prominent working-class northern athletes, who were struggling to maintain their amateur status under the British system, to default to America.³⁶

Until his death on March 19, 1906, aged six-five, Robinson continued to develop a sporting culture in both the college and club system.³⁷ His 'bluff personality' was credited as giving him the popularity and loyalty needed to survive in the uncertain world of sport,³⁸ and the *Boston Daily Globe* reported that Princeton would find it difficult to replace a man whose experience and morals had made his appointment such a good fit within the university athletic department.³⁹

Conclusion: What Does This Mean?

The history of training and coaching in America was similar to that in Britain, with the amateur-professional debate at the heart of the educational and athletic club structure. The transfer of the British professional practices was central to the American amateur system, albeit repackaged and reframed into a more morally acceptable package, but these American values (the employment of professionals, the win-at-all-cost mentality, and the commercialisation of these activities) were perceived as inappropriate within the British culture. In 1901, reports stated that America should be more like England in regards to professional training, with American sports needing to 'raise the standards to which the wise and honest can repair',⁴⁰ but there was widespread reluctance in the adoption of a strict amateur policy because, in a reflection on the British performance, 'the efforts of

³³ George A. White, 'The Manhattan Athletic Club: America's Place in Athletic History', *Outing* 16, no. 3 (1890): 165; 'History of the Manhattan Athletic Club', *Outing* 16, no. 4 (1890): 311.

³⁴ *Daily Princetonian*, February 28, 1900, 1.

³⁵ *New York Tribune*, June 27, 1890, 7.

³⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 23, 1893, 1; *St Louis Post*, January 29, 1893, 23.

³⁷ *Washington Post*, March 20, 1906, 8; *New York Tribune*, March 20, 1906, 10.

³⁸ *Baltimore Sun*, March 20, 1906, 8.

³⁹ *Boston Daily Globe*, March 20, 1906, 9.

⁴⁰ *Harvard Crimson*, October 1, 1901.

the English novices were ludicrous' and were not to be admired.⁴¹ Clearly, America had adopted many elements of professionalism and had become highly successful as a result, which led to some critics arguing that this approach should be more openly integrated into the British system if they wished to compete at the highest level. Although there was recognition that this would help British athletes to be successful, this was to be done within the constraints of amateur legislation, contributing further to the amateur-professional debate that continued to fuel athletics until the mid-twentieth century.⁴² Nonetheless, the role of the professional trainer never completely disappeared from British sport as the master-servant relationship made it acceptable for some trainers to be engaged in these activities without breaking the amateur rules, although these individuals never received the same prominence or acknowledgement as their American colleagues.⁴³

It was suggested that schools for athletic trainers were required, where men could be coached in the art of training, as well as the health and medical aspects, the psychological principles, and the scientific skills of the trade, being able to gain invaluable experience from the 'baker's dozen of really fine trainers', including Robinson, that had made the teaching of sport their life's work. Whilst interest in athletics was peaking, the number of professional trainers who were able to adequately support these men had diminished, and there was concern that the activities would fall into disuse if untrained individuals were to assume these important roles. These schools were considered as a way of legitimising the occupation, the thought process being that as training was provided for many other professions, so it should be available in sport.⁴⁴

Robinson's biography is one which has been lost in American sporting literature, partially due to his British heritage in an increasingly nationalistic society, and partially due to his untimely death as many sporting biographies of 'great American trainers' surrounded those who post-dated World War I. In presenting Robinson's story and uncovering the complex interconnections and dimensions to his sporting career, this paper identifies the need for further de-construction of sporting biography, as well as identification of those lost individuals who shaped the sporting landscape of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, so that a more comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the changing nature of British and American sport can be realised.

⁴¹ Presbrey and Moffatt, *Athletics at Princeton – a History*, 461.

⁴² See Tegan L. Carpenter, 'Uneasy Bedfellows: Amateurism and Coaching Traditions in Twentieth Century British Sport' (PhD diss., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2012).

⁴³ It should be noted that the use of professionals in amateur athletics was also practiced in England, and the scouting and providing of incentives for athletes to move from club-to-club was a consistent part of the British sport, just well hidden under the amateur exterior.

⁴⁴ *Washington Post*, October 22, 1905, SP4.